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CIA Illegally Opened Mail 20 Years

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The CIA opened more than 215,000 letters to and from the Soviet Union for 20 years, even though it knew that the practice was illegal and two internal studies had showed the operation to be poorly run and of marginal intelligence value, according to evidence made public yesterday by the Senate Intelligence Committee.

The disclosures were made after it had been learned that the CIA had opened and read at least three and perhaps eight letters written by Committee Chairman Frank Church (D., Idaho) during and after a trip he made to the Soviet Union in 1971.

Church confirmed that copies of two letters he had written to the Soviet Union "thanking our hosts for their courtesies" had been found later in CIA files.

Statistics provided by the CIA and made public by the committee showed that envelopes containing more than 2.7 million letters to and from the Soviet Union and passing through the New York City post office had been photographed and that 15,820 had been opened.

Against Federal Law

Opening mail is against federal law, although examining and copying information on the outside of letters is permissible under strictly limited circumstances involving national security.

Thomas Abernathy, formerly with the CIA inspector general's office,

told the committee that he had prepared a study in February 1961 showing that "no tangible operational benefits have accrued" to the agency's Soviet division from the mail-opening operation.

Abernathy also said that he had found a lack of coordination among the various CIA units involved in the program. He said he had recommended reconsidering its value as well as preparing a cover story in case the operation were to be publicly disclosed.

"We assumed everybody realized it was illegal," John Glennon, a former CIA official, testified. Glennon conducted a study in 1969 that found no evidence that the operation "provided significant leads or information which would have proved a positive operational help."

Gordon Stewart, who headed the inspector general's office in 1969, told the committee that he had briefed Richard M. Helms, the CIA director then, on the mail-opening project and that "it was my understanding that Helms knew it was illegal."

Helms, now ambassador to Iran, was in the audience as Stewart testified. The former director is sched-

uled to testify before the committee today.

Stewart said that he had recommended placing "a better qualified man" in charge of the mail-opening project, turning the project over to the FBI or closing it down.

The mail-opening program began in 1952 as a legal mail-cover operation in which the outsides of envelopes were photographed, but it soon was expanded into an operation in which the mail was opened. The program was continued until 1973, when James Schlesinger, the CIA director, then ordered it stopped.